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ABSTRACT

To properly assess the problem of adult literacy in the United States and to develop successful intervention programs, it is critical to view literacy not just as a technical proficiency but as a culturally shaped set of practices engaged in by individuals and groups, literate and illiterate. A successful literacy campaign must incorporate outreach and training strategies reaching into communities of illiterate individuals and meeting their daily needs. Historically, the cultural patterning of literacy practices has been extremely diverse. Immigrants have brought their diverse practices to a highly literacy-oriented culture. It is important to distinguish among three dimensions of literacy practices (technical skills, functional knowledge, and social meaning) to develop adult education programs that build on existing skills and knowledge and that enhance or create positive attitudes toward learning the technical skills. Individual differences in attitudes toward social meanings of literacy can profoundly influence individual choices concerning literacy learning and use. Educational planning and intervention should consider not only technical reading and writing skill levels but also the functions of literacy in a community. By integrating the coping strategies of non-literate individuals, taking account of attitudes, and exploiting literacy assistance networks, literacy training can be made more effective and more widely accessible. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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EXPANDING THE CULTURE OF LITERACY

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EXPANDING THE CULTURE OF LITERACY

Adult literacy education in the United States has progressed slowly, plagued by problems of insufficient service capacity in formal programs and of attracting and retaining sufficient tutors and learners in volunteer programs. Some of these difficulties could be overcome by broadening our perception and understanding of literacy and of literacy training. To properly assess the problem of adult illiteracy in the United States and to develop successful intervention programs, it is critical to view literacy not just as a technical proficiency, i.e., a level of skill in encoding and decoding written messages. Rather, literacy constitutes a culturally shaped set of activities or practices exercised by individuals and groups in a variety of different ways and engaged in, to varying degrees, by literates and illiterates alike. For example, reading aloud is an important group activity in many American families. Young children and adults who do not read participate in and enjoy this practice.

Reading and writing may be private, individual activities, e.g., a woman reads a letter from a friend and writes a response. Or they may be family activities, e.g., the father reads aloud from a mail order catalog and, after everyone has expressed preferences, fills out the form for the selected items. Or they may be activities carried out by small social networks, as when adults who lack reading or writing skills seek out a more skilled friend or family member to assist them. These "literacy helpers" assist with tasks such as reading and answering mail, writing out shopping lists, reading aloud stories or scripture, deciphering bus and train schedules, looking up numbers and addresses in the phone book, interpreting labels and instructions on bottles of medicine, and filling out government, employment, and insurance forms.

Most illiterates in our society understand enough about the functions of literacy in American culture to know when they need to use it: They simply cannot accomplish the literacy task without assistance. The least functional of the illiterates are those who have little or no ready access to others' assistance. Thus, in many cases, literacy must be thought of as a shared activity, a family or community practice, rather than as skills possessed and employed by individuals. The extent of such sharing of literacy skills among social networks of illiterates and literates is far greater than is commonly realized.

A successful literacy campaign must incorporate outreach and training strategies that reach into communities of illiterates and meet the needs that both literates and illiterates perceive so acutely in their daily lives. Services must focus on improving illiterates' access to the reading and writing activities that they value, through a combination of basic skills training and enhancement of existing patterns of informal literacy help within the illiterate's family and neighborhood. To have broad impact, we must exploit this untapped reservoir of literacy helpers, training them to tutor, as well as assist, their friends or relatives.

Historically, the cultural patterning of literacy practices has been extremely diverse. In medieval Europe, for example, reading and writing were thought of as separate skills, rarely possessed by one individual. Readers, capable of interpreting documents and formulating essays, were not trained in graphic skills. These leaders dictated to writers trained in the then intricate graphic arts, but such scribes were often not independently capable of composing text. In many cultures literacy has been restricted to certain segments of the population, or used for fewer purposes than Americans would expect. Despite centuries of literacy practice, for

example, Greeks retain a strong oral story-telling tradition, a practice that declined in the U.S. and western Europe as literacy spread.

Literacy in a specific language may have special value. The place of Latin in the European tradition is a good example. Up until this century, no man could regard himself as "literate" if he read and wrote only his national vernacular. Our latinate legal documents reflect the weight of this tradition. And, of course, we afford written contracts far greater validity than verbal promises. Even today, when audio and video compete for an increasing share of the public communication, we retain metaphors such as "I'd like to see that in print" which suggest the greater believability we accord the written word. Yet, elsewhere in the world--and in certain American communities--personal, verbal commitments mean more to people than documents, despite the introduction of written contracts.

Immigrants to the United States have brought their diverse literacy practices with them. Many immigrants, in the present day as in past decades, come from societies in which literacy is not universal or even widespread. And, remote from their families and in an alien language environment, literacy helpers have become, for many newcomers, even more important. The traditional Chinese village's public scribe found a new role as letter-writer and accountant in West Coast Chinatowns. In nineteenth century Polish American settlements the parish priest and nuns functioned as literacy helpers, much as they do in many Hispanic American communities today, translating and interpreting documents, filling out English-language forms, assisting with telegrams and letters to family back home. Throughout American history, as free public education became more and more universal, families have called upon their schoolchildren to write letters, fill out forms, and assist them in meetings with authorities. Today, illiterate

adults--immigrants and native English speakers alike--continue to rely on their children as literacy helpers.

American religious traditions have also influenced attitudes toward literacy and, thus, literacy learning. Early and continuing impetus for expansion of education has come from Protestant Christian groups, for whom the regular practice of Bible study, by individuals and families, as well as in the public worship services, is an important activity. Some American religions so highly honor the practice of literacy that they require adherents to learn to read in a second, sacred language. In Judaism young boys traditionally had to demonstrate ability to read a passage of Hebrew scripture to qualify for admission to the congregation.

The United States is a highly literacy-oriented culture. We use literacy to accomplish a large number of functions, many of which are conducted orally elsewhere in the world. And we place a high value on literacy; lack of technical literacy skills is often a source of great embarrassment to non-reading or non-writing adults. Yet literates and illiterates alike must function within this culture of literacy. Most illiterates participate in literacy practices, but, collaboratively with their helpers, at a distance once removed from actual reading and writing. Although they lack the technical skills of reading and writing, they may have functional knowledge of literacy practices and an understanding of the social meaning of literacy in American society.

It is important to distinguish among these three dimensions of literacy practices--technical skills, functional knowledge, and social meaning--if we are to develop adult education programs that build upon illiterates' existing skills and knowledge and which enhance or create positive attitudes toward learning the technical skills of reading and writing. An individual is technically engaged in literacy practice if he or she is directly

encoding or decoding written messages. Other participants in a literacy practice may not be technically engaged with writing, but may nevertheless be functionally engaged. Although they are not directly involved in reading and writing, they do understand and take into account the existence and functions of writing for the specific purpose.

The variety of responses to receiving mail in a small rural town will illustrate this distinction of technical versus functional knowledge. Many adults in this community are technically illiterate, that is, they cannot read and write. Nearly all, however, comprehend the importance of mail. Some functionally knowledgeable, but technically illiterate individuals keep all their mail until visited by a person who can serve as a literacy helper--often the outreach worker from the local parish. This literacy helper sorts through it and assists with responses to important pieces. Others have learned to differentiate junk mail from personal mail and select out the pieces that they will hold for interpretation. These people could be characterized as functionally knowledgeable, possessing marginal technical reading skills. On the other hand, there are some members of the community who simply throw out all their mail unopened. They are ignoring the importance of mail in American culture and are choosing not to be even functionally engaged in this literacy practice.

The social meaning of literacy derives, in part, from a society's ascription of value to writing per se. Religious practices and liturgical uses of writing provide many examples. It is an honor, for instance, to read the scripture in a Christian worship service because of the direct relation between the reader and the text the congregation holds sacred. Additionally, the ability to read, and write, well have strong positive social and economic value. Literacy expertise is highly rewarded in the

United States. Attorneys are sought for their skill in reading and writing a particularly arcane, complicated and important type of document.

Again, perception of the social meaning of literacy practices represents knowledge often shared by literates and illiterates alike. In fact, illiterates in the United States are demonstrating their awareness of the social meaning of literacy by refusing to come forward and enroll in adult literacy tutoring--they recognize the stigma of admitting they cannot read and write. Many have been able to hide their lack of skill and manage their lives fairly successfully by using family or community literacy helpers. They are not willing to face the embarrassment of public admission or of having to ask a stranger for help.

Individual differences in recognizing and accepting various social meanings of literacy can bring about profound differences in the choices individuals make about acquiring and/or using literacy skills. Thus the learner's often complex or ambivalent attitudes about literacy must be taken into account in structuring adult educational intervention. The significance of multiple social meanings for literacy can be seen in the differing attitudes to reading and writing in English and in Slavonic in an isolated Alaska village. Literacy was first introduced through Russian priests who established a missionary church. In that tradition, the reading of the scripture, in Slavonic, is an essential part of the worship service. The native language was retained, however, for secular uses and most communication continued in the traditional oral mode. Native lay readers were trained in Slavonic and continued to read the sacred texts in a rote fashion long after the missionaries had left and the villagers had lost the ability to actively comprehend the language. Literacy associated with Orthodox practice came to be regarded as "native" to the village and its

readers highly respected. The Orthodox church and its literacy practices--largely restricted to reading for worship purposes--are viewed as a force for community coherence and native cultural integrity.

When public education was introduced into this village by the U.S. government early in this century, however, literacy took on a second, different social meaning. Teachers encouraged full-time use of English, eventually leading to near-extinction of the native language. The schools, the American government, and the new, English-based Baptist church all stressed the importance of active use of English writing for a whole new range of literacy practices, including conducting village business. English, and especially English reading and writing, came to be associated with forces that were destructive to native tradition. The influence of these negative associations can still be seen today. Even though English literacy has gradually pervaded many aspects of community life, villagers continue to prefer to conduct much of their business orally and are extremely reticent to display their English literacy skills. Adult literacy programs have tended to attract few in this village for this reason.

As this example suggests, educational planning and intervention efforts should consider not just technical reading and writing skill levels, but the functions of literacy in a community and its social meaning for community members. In contrast to the negative social meaning that characterizes English literacy in the Alaska village, adults in a community of recent Hmong immigrants have developed multiple literacies with strongly positive social meanings. For these Southeast Asian refugees, literacy in their native language is spreading at the same time that they are acquiring verbal and written English. The Hmong find themselves in an environment where, for the first time, they perceive widespread uses of literacy practices. Among their own ethnic group, they now need Hmong literacy for personal

correspondence with widely scattered kin. Further, the Hmong believe that practice of Hmong literacy enhances their English-as-a-second-language learning, in both speaking and writing. And, to get ahead in urban American society, they feel they require technical skills in English literacy. Since they are newcomers, lack of literacy skill is not yet stigmatized for Hmong adults.

As a tiny minority group in the United States the Hmong recognize English literacy acquisition as an imperative if they are to succeed in their adopted country. However, many illiterates manage quite well with little technical ability to read and write. They can rely on their families, neighbors, and community organizations to assist them. Often the relation between a literacy helper and an illiterate is reciprocal: One provides reading and writing services, the other baby-sitting, errands, or other personal help.

A study of the coping ability of illiterate adults profiled a small businessman who had adapted by minimizing written tasks and distributing the literacy work of his construction firm to other employees. He, himself, made client contracts, recording "notes" of the interviews on a portable tape recorder. His office assistant then developed all necessary documents from the audio recordings, much as secretaries of attorneys and executive managers work from dictaphones. This man's employees were also long-term friends and neighbors. They respected their boss for his other business and personal skills, overlooking his illiteracy.

This small businessman is fortunate that he has literacy helpers whom he can trust and depend on to provide services that make them privy to their employer's financial dealings. The privacy question is a critical problem for many illiterates. First, the request for help reveals their illiteracy --a powerful stigma. And, second, they must trust the helper with a

document whose content they, themselves, may not yet know. Although much of the reading they request is not of a sensitive nature, illiterates must find a helper whom they trust to be discrete about their most intimate personal, legal, and financial affairs. For example, personal correspondence may focus on family problems; other mail might reveal financial or legal difficulties.

Illiterates report that they assess each literacy task in terms of its appropriateness for a specific literacy helper. They may, for instance, have their children read most things to them, but retain a few problem documents for an outsider. One woman requested help from a non-family member for answering a follow-up letter to a mail order catalog order because she knew her daughter--her usual literacy helper--would not approve of her purchase.

Yet, for most illiterates living within a stable community environment, these problems are not in themselves totally debilitating. It is isolation from trustworthy helpers that incapacitates them. Local neighborhoods provide services and shops where most business can be conducted orally and forms taken home to fill out with helpers. Ethnic neighborhoods are a good example: Their residents are able to minimize their need for English-language literacy in daily life. Outside of such a neighborhood an illiterate adult has no personal resources to acquire the literacy help he or she needs. And the stigma of illiteracy makes seeking help from strangers a highly unattractive and difficult task. Illiteracy thus often means that adults operate within confined circumstances, whether by choice or necessity.

Many illiterates have taught themselves to read or write to meet certain purposes that are important in their lives. In one community we encountered a woman who had taught herself to read so that she could teach a Sunday

school class. She is deeply religious and spends each Saturday evening laboriously studying the materials and Bible passages with which to instruct her church's kindergarteners. This woman does not write, however, and uses literacy helpers for other reading tasks. Others have, with assistance from family, friends, or neighbors, mastered sufficient reading and writing skills to pass the driver's license exam or complete an in-house employment application form. Adults also learn reading and writing from their school-age children, working to follow the youngsters' progress in school. Indeed, as studies of schoolchildren's reading and writing have shown, a highly influential factor in children's acquisition of literacy is the richness of literacy practices in the home environment, especially the extent to which they have been read to as young children. Adults, too, benefit from such exposure.

Illiterate adults often carry slips of paper from which they can rote copy their address and phone number, the alphabetic versions of the numbers for writing a check, or information for filling out commonly encountered business forms. School dropouts living as "street kids" report that their most prized possession is their pocketful of name and address slips. Since they live in a transient community, they can only maintain contact with friends through writing, leaving notes for one another at community centers or sending cards to the last known address. They may have tested very low on their school verbal arts exams, but they must rely on these and other literacy skills to ensure survival on the street.

All these literacy survival skills--use of familiar helpers, spontaneous acquisition of literacy, coping strategies such as use of audio tapes and "crib sheets"--can be stepping stones to literacy education. By integrating illiterates' coping strategies, taking account of their attitudes toward literacy, and exploiting the literacy assistance networks, literacy training

can be made more effective for and more widely accessible to adult illiterates.

As we have seen, community responses to educational intervention have met with a wide range of responses. Literacy training may be perceived as disruptive to the community, as in the Alaska village; as critically important, as among the Hmong; or as valuable, but not essential or worth the personal risk, as it is for most illiterates living among their family and friends. In each of these circumstances different programmatic strategies are called for.

In the first case, the Alaskan villagers, adult literacy education would be much more effective presented in a way that supported, rather than challenged, traditional life. For example, collecting and recording old people's native stories, which would become literacy texts for the younger people to relearn, or creating bilingual books to retain the native language as English reading and writing are learned.

In the second case, at the opposite extreme, the Hmong are eager to reach out beyond their tiny community and committed to long-term settlement in the American community. They readily enroll in institutional adult education classes, if they are accessible to them. Strangers to the land, they have had little prior opportunity to acquire literacy, so do not regard learning as adults and from strangers as embarrassing or particularly alienating.

The third case, illiterates resident in long-standing, established communities, is by far the most widespread situation, and, if approached from a community assistance point of view, the most readily addressed. For the vast majority of illiterates--bilinguals as well as native English speakers--educational intervention will have the most immediate impact and

be most readily accepted if it takes place within the context of established community helping networks.

Outreach might proceed through community organizations such as churches, neighborhood associations, unions, and extended kinship networks. This effort would train literacy helpers as tutors for the illiterate friends or relatives they already assist with reading and writing or use the helpers to provide literacy helping and teaching services through existing community institutions, such as the church, where illiterate adults are accustomed to go for help--and where there is no public stigma in help-seeking. Assessment of community needs can also proceed through the assistance of literacy helpers. For example, among new immigrants literacy training for some adults would need to start with functional, not technical literacy skills. But, for most adult illiterates, functions already perceived by the learner would be the basis for constructing learning materials. This community assistance approach reinforces, rather than challenges, ongoing literacy practices and brings existing community resources into the national effort to expand literacy to all adults.